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ABSTRACT

The conceptual level of teachers was measured in relation to their preferences for support in the supervisory tasks of staff development, curriculum development, and instructional improvement. It was hypothesized that teachers at a high level of conceptual development would prefer to be more involved with others and more flexible in adapting their teaching methods than teachers at lower conceptual levels. Involvement with others, characteristic of higher levels of conceptual development, was identified as a key variable in the three tasks of supervision. Participants in the study were 249 elementary school teachers located in 11 schools. Teachers' conceptual level was measured using the Paragraph Completion Method. Preferences for supervisory support were measured by a questionnaire consisting of 30 items written in a 7-point Likert-type fashion designed to measure the conceptual characteristics of involvement and flexibility as they related to supervision. Results indicated that, regardless of conceptual level, teachers preferred to be involved in all three supervisory tasks. They also wanted to participate in classroom intervisitation, to increase their ways of teaching through planning and organizing their own long-term staff development plans, and to be involved in activities offered outside the school district. The Paragraph Completion Method instrument is appended as is the Preference for Supervisory Support Questionnaire. (JD)

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A Study of the Relationship of Teacher Conceptual Level with Perceptions of Teachers in Regard to Staff Development, Curriculum Development, and Instructional Improvement

A Paper for Presentation
at the Annual Meeting
of the
American Educational Research Association

New Orleans
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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate teachers' level of conceptual development in relation to their preferences for supervisory support in three tasks of supervision: staff development, instructional improvement, and curriculum development.

In previous research, teachers at higher conceptual levels were capable of generating more alternatives in problem solving situations, radiating a variety of environments in the classroom, and being more tolerant than teachers at lower levels of conceptual development. For this study, it was hypothesized that teachers at higher conceptual levels would prefer to be involved with others and would prefer greater flexibility and fluency ineach of the tasks than teachers at lower conceptual levels of development.

Conceptual systems theory (Harvey, Hunt, and Schroder, 1961) provided the theoretical foundation for this study. Conceptual systems theory was described as "how an individual learns to adapt to his interpersonal environment, how such a pattern of adaptation affects his reactions to contemporaneous events, and how such patterns of conceptual organization may be modified" (Harvey, Hunt, and Schroder, 1961, p. 8).

Teachers' conceptual level was measured using The Paragraph Completion Method (1978) developed by Hunt and Associates at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. The PCM was a semi-projective test designed to measure "how a person thinks."

Subjects responded to five topic stems by writing at least three sentences for each stem.

Teachers' preferences for supervisory support was measured using an instrument developed by the researcher. The questionnaire consisted of thirty items written in a 7 point Likert-type fashion ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The instrument was designed to measure the conceptual characteristics of involvement and flexibility as they related to supervision.

Both instruments were administered to 249 elementary school teachers located in 11 schools. The sample was selected randomly from a list of elementary schools in a southeastern state.

The findings revealed that the majority (61%) of the teachers were at a high level of conceptual development according to the norms of the Paragraph Completion Method. Such a large percentage of high conceptual thinking was contrary to previous studies of conceptual level of teachers. Teachers indicated a strong preference for involvement with others and flexibility in their teaching as measured by the Preference for Supervisory Support Questionnaire. However, there was no relationship between teachers' conceptual level and their preferences for supervisory support.

Many school systems are responding to the recommendations included in recent education reports, such as Nation at Risk (1983), A Place Called School (1984), and High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America (1983). Topics such as merit pay, master teachers, graduation standards, length of the school day and year, and teacher education programs are discussed frequently in newspaper articles, school board meetings, faculty meetings, and television specials. With the current emphasis on education, the timing appears appropriate for supervisors (i.e., those responsible for improving instruction through staff development, curriculum development, and direct assistance to teachers) to have a significant role in identifying, organizing, planning, and implementing changes that will affect the classroom teacher.

Supervisors, however, must refrain from the temptation to dictate change. If past experience is a predictor, actions stimulated by the reports will be imposed on teachers rather than developed with teachers. This outcome is predictable even though the evidence is strong that unless teachers are involved in determining school improvement agendas, plans for change are not likely to be implemented (Bentzen and Associates, 1974; Schaffarzick, 1976; McLaughlin and Marsh, 1978; Tyler, 1983). Gross, Giacquinta, and Bernstein (1971) report that involvement alone does not ensure successful change. They cite four factors which inhibit the implementation of teacher change: 1) lack of clarity about the innovation; 2) lack of teachers' skills and knowledge to carry it out; 3) unavailability of required

materials and equipment; and 4) incompatibility of organizational arrangement with the change.

The four areas identified by Gross, et. al., appear to fit the role of the supervisor as change agent. The supervisor can ensure that teachers 1) understand the components of an innovation, 2) acquire the necessary skills to implement change, 3) have the essential materials and equipment, and 4) adapt the innovation to their context. The supervisor's role must be one of helping, facilitating, and supporting teacher change.

Blumberg (1980) notes that "before supervisors can help teachers, the teacher must want to receive help" (p. 18). He also states that teachers, as well as supervisors, vary in the way they interpret information. This difference of perceptions often leads to what Blumberg calls a "private cold war." The "cold war" is due to the lack of congruence between the perceptions of teachers and supervisors.

Individual variation in perception is a result of how individuals process information. As teachers process information, they "refer to either a personal perspective, to an implicit theory, to a conceptual system, or to a belief system about teaching and learning" (Clark and Yinger, 1979, p. 251). Through information processing, individuals attach relevance to events. Harvey, Hunt, and Schroder (1961) state that "the behavioral relevance of an object "out there" is dependent on the way it is differentiated from the booming, buzzing, environment and functionally compared consciously or unconsciously, to key internal referents operative at the moment" (p. 12). Likewise,

research on teacher thinking (NIE Panel 6, 1975; Borko, et.al., 1979; Clark and Yinger, 1979; Parker, 1983; Clark, 1983) emphasizes that what teachers do is directed in no small measure by what they think. It appears that supervisors should be aware of how teachers perceive information before attempting to implement change through staff development, curriculum development, and instructional improvement activities. Therefore, a study which measures how teachers think in relation to their preferences for supervisory support may assist supervisors in the delivery of services to teachers.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to report the results of a study which measured teachers' conceptual level (Hunt, et al., 1978) in relation to their preferences for support in the supervisory tasks of staff development, curriculum development, and instructional improvement. Presented in this paper is the theoretical foundation of the study and its relationship to supervision. Also discussed is the conduct of the study, the findings, and recommendations for future research.

Conceptual Systems Theory

In their initial work, Harvey, Hunt, and Schroder (1961) proposed that individual differences were a function of one's conceptual system. They described conceptual systems theory as

"how an individual learns to adapt to his interpersonal environment, how such a pattern of adaptation affects his reactions to contemporaneous events, and how such patterns of conceptual organization may be modified" (p. 8). They postulated that individuals move from a concrete to an abstract conceptual system as they increased their ability to differentiate and integrate information. The ability to differentiate concepts referred to the "breaking of a novel situation into more clearly defined and articulated parts," (Harvey, et al, 1961, p. 18) while the integration of concepts was the "relating or hooking of such parts to each other and to previous conceptual standards" (Harvey, Hunt, and Schroder, 1961, p. 18).

Many researchers (Hunt and Joyce, 1967; Murphy and Brown, 1970, Rathbone, 1970) have formulated hypotheses concerning teachers' information processing based on conceptual systems theory. In these studies, a high conceptual level of development was characterized "by greater empathy in interpersonal skills and by more capability in generating alternatives when making decisions" (Harvey, Hunt, and Schroder, 1961, p. 72). Teachers at higher conceptual levels of development were described as more effective in the classroom when compared with teachers at lower conceptual levels of development. They utilized more teaching techniques, were more flexible in their handling of information, and were more capable of generating alternative solutions than teachers at a lower conceptual level of development.

Based on conceptual systems theory (Harvey, Hunt and Schroder, 1961), it was hypothesized that teachers who were at a higher level of conceptual development would prefer to be more involved with others and would prefer to be more flexible in adapting their teaching methods than teachers at lower conceptual levels of development. Involvement with others was identified as a key variable in three tasks of supervision and was a characteristic of higher levels of conceptual development. Individuals with a high conceptual level of development would be able to take into account the wishes and intentions of others and would attempt to understand other points of view. They would be more likely to develop mutually interdependent relationships than individuals at low conceptual levels of development.

The ability to be flexible was a second characteristic of conceptual development which was used in this study. Flexibility in teaching referred to the teachers' desire to change or modulate their teaching. Hunt (1966) defined flexibility as the "ability to shift from one environment to another under appropriate circumstances" (p. 140). In other words, flexible individuals were capable of "reading" a situation and then "flexing" their behavior in order to produce specific behaviors. Flexibility, like involvement with others, was a characteristic of individuals at higher levels of conceptual development. This study utilized two characteristics of conceptual systems theory: involvement with others and the ability to be flexible in predicting teachers' preferences for supervisory support.

Methods

Subjects

Fifteen elementary schools in a southeastern state were selected randomly to participate in the study. Eleven schools, involving 292 teachers, chose to participate. Teachers voluntarily responded to two instruments. Two hundred and forty-nine teachers (85%) completed both instruments. Demographic information was requested as part of the Preferences for Supervisory Support Questionnaire.

Instruments

Two instruments were used to gather data for this study. The first instrument, the Paragraph Completion Method (PCM) was developed by Hunt and Associates (1978) at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). It was a semi-projective test used to measure conceptual level of development. The PCM (See Appendix A) consisted of six topic stems to which teachers responded by writing three sentences. One topic stem "What I think about parents..." was omitted after consulting with one of the authors of the PCM scoring manual. She stated that the topic stem, "What I think about parents..." yielded too much of a variance among individuals. The topic stems which were administered to teachers were:

1. What I think about rules...
2. When I am criticized...
3. When someone does not agree with me...
4. When I am not sure...
5. When I am told what to do...

The completed instrument provided "thought samples which were scored according to how a person thinks" (Hunt, et al., 1978, p. 1). The protocols were scored by a trained rater at the Ontario Institute who assigned a rating of 0-3 for each topic stem. A total conceptual level score was obtained by averaging the top three responses.

The second instrument, Preference for Supervisory Support Questionnaire (PSSQ) was designed to reflect the conceptual characteristics of involvement with others and flexibility and fluency in teaching as they related to three tasks of supervision. The instrument was based on a review of related research and literature in supervision. The PSSQ consisted of 11 variables. The questionnaire included three tasks of supervision: staff development, instructional improvement, and curriculum development. Each task area was designed to measure two aspects of conceptual development: involvement with others and flexibility and fluency in teaching. A matrix was developed to aid in placing items in the appropriate category. As a result of this procedure, 11 variables were identified. They were:

1. Staff Development Involvement
2. Staff Development Flexibility
3. Instructional Improvement Involvement
4. Instructional Improvement Flexibility
5. Curriculum Development Involvement
6. Curriculum Development Flexibility
7. Total Involvement
8. Total Flexibility
9. Total Staff Development
10. Total Instructional Improvement
11. Total Curriculum Development

The PSSQ was validated by a panel of experts in educational supervision and had a test-retest reliability coefficient of .87. The questionnaire consisted of 30 items (See Appendix B) written in a Likert-type fashion. Participants were asked to select one of seven options indicating their level of agreement specified as follows:

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Undecided	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	4	6	7

Responses to the questionnaire were coded according to the seven point scale and transferred to coding sheets.

Analysis and Findings

The analysis of the demographic information indicated that the majority of the sample was female (93%), young, (75% between the ages of 22-41), and had less than ten years experience (58%). Many of the teachers (.41) taught at the K-3 level and the majority of teachers (.54) held teaching certificates at the T-5 (Master's) level. (See Table 1.)

The data were analyzed using ANOVA. The conceptual level score was the independent variable and the variables in the Preferences for Supervisory Support Questionnaire comprised the dependent variables. The means for the Preferences for Supervisory Support Questionnaire ranged from a low of 5.4 in Curriculum Development Involvement to a high of 5.8 in Curriculum Development Flexibility. (See Table 2.) Teachers, overall, indicated a strong preference for involvement with others in the three tasks of supervision and wanted flexibility and fluency in their teaching.

Hunt and Associates (1978) expressed the variation of conceptual level scores as follows:

Low = 0-1.0

Moderate = 1.2-1.9

High = 2.0+

These levels were expressed typically as variation in learning styles. An individual in the low range (0-1.0) was perceived as needing a great deal of structure whereas a person in the high (2.0+) range needed little or no structure. In this study, 14 teachers (6%) were in the low conceptual level range. However,

none of the 14 teachers received a total conceptual level score below 1.0. The number of teachers in the moderate and high conceptual level range were 82 (33%) and 153 (61%) respectively.

Table 3 depicts the F-value for each of the dependent variables and conceptual level. There is no correlation between any of the variables and level of conceptual development. (See Table 4.)

Discussion and Implications

The majority of teachers (61%) in this study were at a high level of conceptual development. This finding was unexpected based on previous research (Harvey, et al., 1968; Murphy and Brown, 1970) which reported teachers clustered at the lower levels of conceptual development. It would appear that teachers in this sample would be capable of "radiating a variety of environments" to meet the needs of their students.

Regardless of conceptual level, teachers preferred to be involved in staff development, instructional improvement, and curriculum development activities. Teachers indicated a desire to be involved with others in the planning and organizing of staff development programs. They also wanted to participate in classroom intervisitation, to increase their ways of teaching through planning and organizing their own long term staff development plans, and to be involved in activities offered outside the school district.

In the task area of instructional improvement teachers expressed a strong preference for involvement in the selection,

Table 1

Demographic Information for the Sample

Variable	Frequency	Percentage of the Total
Sex		
Male	16	.06
Female	230	.92
Missing Value	3	.01
Age		
22-31	94	.38
32-41	86	.35
42-51	35	.14
52-61	23	.09
Over 62	1	.004
Missing Value	10	.04
Years of Teaching Experience		
Less than 10	144	.58
More than 10	105	.42
Teaching Level		
K-3	99	.40
4-5	59	.24
6-7	33	.13
Other	48	.19
Missing Value	10	.04
Highest Teaching Certificate		
T-4	98	.39
T-5	129	.52
T-6	14	.06
Missing Value	8	.03

Table 2

Preference for Supervisory Support Questionnaire Mean Scores by Variables

N = 249

Variable	Mean
Staff Development Involvement	5.70
Staff Development Flexibility	5.75
Instructional Improvement Involvement	5.75
Instructional Improvement Flexibility	5.79
Curriculum Development Involvement	5.49
Curriculum Development Flexibility	5.86
Total Involvement	5.65
Total Flexibility	5.80
Total Staff Development	5.72
Total Instructional Improvement	5.77
Total Curriculum Development	5.68

Table 3

Mean Scores by Conceptual Levels and F-values

on the Preference for Supervisory Support Questionnaire

Variable	Means for Groups			
	Low CL (N=14)	Moderate CL (N=82)	High CL (N=153)	F-value
Staff Development Involvement	5.78	5.71	5.69	0.12
Staff Development Flexibility	5.78	5.76	5.74	0.06
Instructional Improvement Involvement	5.78	5.70	5.77	0.20
Instructional Improvement Flexibility	5.62	5.81	5.79	0.33
Curriculum Development Involvement	5.28	5.50	5.51	0.40
Curriculum Development Flexibility	5.72	5.90	5.86	0.36
Total Involvement	5.61	5.63	5.66	0.05
Total Flexibility	5.71	5.82	5.79	0.29
Total Staff Development	5.78	5.74	5.71	0.11
Total Instructional Improvement	5.70	5.75	5.78	0.11
Total Curriculum Development	5.50	5.70	5.68	0.48

Table 4

Correlation Coefficients for Preference for Supervisory Support Questionnaire Variables and Conceptual Level of Development

Variable	
Staff Development Involvement	0.046
Staff Development Flexibility	0.028
Instructional Improvement Involvement	0.011
Instructional Improvement Flexibility	0.033
Curriculum Development Involvement	0.016
Curriculum Development Flexibility	0.026
Total Involvement	0.028
Total Flexibility	0.039
Total Staff Development	0.043
Total Instructional Improvement	0.024
Total Curriculum Development	0.024

development, analysis, and interpretation of methods and instruments for classroom observations. They also wanted to identify new ways of presenting information and to practice different teaching methods.

Curriculum development was another task area in which teachers expressed a preference for involvement. They wanted to be involved in selecting materials, developing units for the classroom, and establishing standards for student academic performance. In addition, teachers preferred to add variety to their teaching by planning instructional units at their grade level or in their subject area.

Recommendations

According to their conceptual levels, teachers in this study appear capable of using a variety of teaching styles, appear more flexible in their handling of information, and capable of generating alternatives in solving problems. Therefore, it is assumed that these teachers would be able to adapt to changes within their school districts rather than resisting change. Knowledge of teachers' conceptual level, however, is only one dimension of the person and it alone should not guide the decisions made by supervisors. Hunt (1983) notes that "conceptual level as a single variable, provides an incomplete description of the individual and needs to be considered one part of the whole" (p. 8).

In addition to conceptual level, other variables or accessibility channels need to be studied. Teachers may exhibit high conceptual levels of development on the PCM but may not exhibit

complexity in their behavior. Studies which look at teachers' actual behavior within a given context might be considered for future research. There needs to be more research utilizing Hunt's (1975) application of Lewin's B-P-E formula (Behavior as a function of the person and the environment).

Even though there was not a relationship between teachers' conceptual level and their preferences for supervisory support, the factors which influenced preference for involvement may be another dimension of the person which warrants further study. Teachers' actual involvement in staff development, curriculum development, and instructional improvement activities may yield different results. Since teachers strongly preferred to be involved, any change strategy that did not respond to their desire for involvement should be suspect.

Educational changes cannot occur unless an attempt is made to understand how events are perceived by those individuals most affected by change--the classroom teacher. Hopefully, the results of this study will be used to reevaluate the role of the classroom teacher in staff development, curriculum development, and instructional improvement activities.

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For an excellent review of research related to Conceptual Systems Theory see:

Miller, A. (1981). Conceptual matching models and interactional research in education. Review of Educational Research, 56, 33-84.

Appendix A

Paragraph Completion Method

Last four digits of Social Security Number

___ ___ ___ ___

On the following pages you will be asked to give your ideas about several topics. Try to write at least three sentences on each topic.

There are no right or wrong answers, so give your own ideas and opinions about each topic. Indicate the way you <u>really</u> feel about each topic, not the way others feel or the way you think you should feel.

You will have about 3 minutes for each page.

Please wait for the signal to go to a new page.

1. What I think about rules. . . .

Try to write at least three sentences on this topic.

WAIT FOR SIGNAL TO TURN PAGE

2. When I am criticized. . . .

Try to write at least three sentences on this topic.

WAIT FOR SIGNAL TO TURN PAGE

3. What I think about parents. . . .

Try to write at least three sentences on this topic.

WAIT FOR SIGNAL TO TURN PAGE

4. When someone does not agree with me. . . .

Try to write at least three sentences on this topic.

WAIT FOR SIGNAL TO TURN PAGE

5. When I am not sure. . . .

Try to write at least three sentences on this topic.

WAIT FOR SIGNAL TO TURN PAGE

6. When I am told what to do. . . .

Try to write at least three sentences on this topic.

WAIT FOR SIGNAL TO TURN PAGE

Appendix B

Preference for Supervisory Support Questionnaire

Teacher Questionnaire Concerning Preferences for Supervisory Support

Instructions: Please read each item carefully, some items are stated affirmatively and some are stated negatively. Indicate your level of agreement with the item by circling the appropriate number.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Undecided	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Example: I prefer to be involved with others when planning a vacation.	1	2	3	4	(5)	6	7
Staff Development Items							
1. I do not prefer to be involved with others in planning and organizing my own long term staff development plan for self-improvement.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. I wish to be involved with others in determining the agenda for staff development programs.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. I wish to participate in classroom intervisitation to observe teaching techniques.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. I prefer to be involved with others in acquiring or developing skills which will help me improve my performance in the classroom, as a member of the school faculty, and as a professional in the school district.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. I want to be involved with others in investigating how to improve my teaching through activities planned and offered outside the school district.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. I prefer to add new ways of teaching through utilizing skills acquired in staff development activities.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. I want to increase my ways of teaching through planning and organizing my own long term staff development plan for self-improvement.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. I do not desire to learn new ways of teaching through activities planned and offered outside the school district.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9. I want to learn different ways of teaching by visiting other teachers to observe their teaching techniques.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10. I wish to expand my ways of teaching to help me improve my performance in the classroom, as a member of the school faculty, and as a professional in the school district.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

(Please note items on back)

Instructional Improvement Items

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Undecided	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
11. I wish to be involved with others in the analysis and interpretation of observation data on my teaching.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12. I prefer to be involved with others in identifying new or expanding my current ways of presenting information.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13. I do not prefer to be involved with others in selecting and developing observation methods to gather information about my teaching.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14. I want to participate with others in the learning and use of new teaching methods to improve my classroom instruction.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
15. I want to be involved with others in identifying and using multiple sources of information about students.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
16. I wish to learn more about how my teaching skills can be revised to meet the needs of my students.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
17. I wish to add to my teaching effectiveness by identifying new or expanding my current ways of presenting information.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
18. I do not want to increase my ways of teaching by practicing and incorporating different teaching methods.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
19. I prefer to learn more about my ways of teaching through the analysis and interpretation of observation data on my teaching.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
20. I want to discover more about my ways of teaching by selecting or developing and using observation methods to gather information.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Curriculum Development Items

21. I do not wish to participate with others in selecting a variety of materials to implement the district curriculum guides.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
22. I prefer to be involved with others in selecting different ways to implement the district curriculum guides.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
23. I would like help from others in developing units for my classroom not mentioned in the district guide.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Undecided	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
24. I want to participate with others in planning instructional units at my grade level or in my subject area.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
25. I prefer to include others in establishing standards for student academic performance in my classroom.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
26. I prefer to add to my teaching repertoire by selecting a variety of materials.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
27. I do not prefer to learn more about my teaching skills through student feedback.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
28. I want to add variety to my teaching by planning instructional units at my grade level or in my subject area.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
29. I wish to expand my teaching by including units for my classroom not mentioned in the district guides.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
30. I want to add to my teaching skills by selecting different ways to implement the district curriculum guides.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Last four digits of Social Security Number: ___ ___ ___ ___

Instructions: Please circle the numeral associated with your answer.

Number of Years of Teaching Experience:
0 - 5.....1
6 - 10.....2
11 - 19.....3
20 or more..4

Sex:
Male.....1
Female....2

Highest Teaching Certificate Held:
T-4.....1
T-5.....2
T-6.....3
Doctorate.....4

Teaching Level:
K-3.....1
4-5.....2
6-7.....3
Other.....4
(e.g. music, P.E., resource teacher)

Age:
22-31.....1
32-41.....2
42-51.....3
52-61.....4
over 62.....5

Skip Something? Incomplete responses will invalidate the results of the questionnaire. Please check to see that you have completed all items.